

Mathias Girel

Chapter 2

Are There Ambiguous Gestures?

Abstract: If we accept the hypothesis that we can get confused about gestures, which seems to be a quite ordinary experience, the next task in order is to provide an account of ambiguous gestures or, at the very least, of the conditions under which they can *become* ambiguous. That is the subject of the present paper: investigating the conditions of possibility for the ambiguity of gestures. In what follows, I shall address several possible causes for this ambiguity. The first one would be categorial: the idea is that an incomplete metaphysics of gestures would leave us in a situation where we cannot make a difference between complete and incomplete gestures, so much so that all gestures would become ambiguous on *a priori* grounds. The second one is contextual: depending on the way we assent to gestures, they can (or so it seems) always be downgraded to a lower status, incomplete gestures or mere acts. Finally, I shall take advantage of Anscombe's philosophy of intention to show in which ways our environment can contribute to the ambiguity of gestures.

Keywords: Peirce, Charles S, Anscombe, Elizabeth, ambiguity, intention, felicity (of speech acts), degenerate (categories), categories

1 Introduction

I have two main reasons to be interested in gestures. The first one might seem trivial. The initial riddle I have been grappling with, in my first encounters with Pragmatism, was the following: pragmatism is supposed to have performed a “practical” turn, between the 1870s and 1900, and overturned a Cartesian approach, dominated by “ideas” and “intuitions.” Still, the pragmatist account of practice is by no means monolithic and has sometimes been developed a long time after the first methodological proposals (Girel 2021). Telling us that, in order to make our ideas and meanings clear, we needed to look at “practical bearings,” and sometimes even at the conduct of the inquirer, was not a ready-made solution, it was a *problem*; it was the beginning of an investigation. Some of the most interesting attempts, by Peirce, at providing a “proof” of his pragmatism, involve

Mathias Girel, École Normale Supérieure-PSL, Paris, France, e-mail: mathias.girel@ens.psl.eu

the kind of gestures we make when we draw a logical graph (Hookway 2012; Maddalena 2015). The Pragmatist revolution was in many ways a grammatical and metaphysical inquiry into gestures.

In addition to this, I had another reason: working on the epistemology of the Pragmatists, I have very early been interested in their concept of “inquiry.” Successful inquiries certainly qualify as “complete gestures,” in Giovanni Maddalena’s sense. Even if we use a less technical vocabulary, inquiries are things we *do*, and, as I have suggested elsewhere, it is interesting to see whether the usual categories of action, including failure, can apply to these particular actions named inquiries (Girel 2017). Actions can fail, they can fail persistently, and they can fail under the action of third-party strategies. Is it true too about inquiries, and in which ways? My intuition, here, was that a good part of what has been published under the rubric of “Agnotology” (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008), “ignorance studies” (Gross and McGoe 2022), the “Merchants of Doubt” strategies (Oreskes and Conway 2010), or again the “production of ignorance”, could be made clearer if we read the processes that are described by Proctor, Oreskes, and others against a background provided by a pragmatist epistemology (Girel 2022). If inquiries are done, how can they be undone? Here, the concern was that we might easily be confused about gestures: some agents seem to do something, pursuing an inquiry, while doing just the opposite, undermining this inquiry. The motto “we need more research,” for example, can play both roles. If we accept the hypothesis that we can get confused about gestures, in particular epistemic gestures, the next thing we need is an account of ambiguous gestures or, at the very least, of the conditions under which they can *become* ambiguous. That is the subject of the present paper: investigating the conditions of possibility for the ambiguity of gestures.

In what follows, I shall address several possible causes for this ambiguity. The first one would be metaphysical: the idea is that an incomplete metaphysics of gestures would leave us in a situation where we cannot make a difference between complete and incomplete gestures, so much so that all gestures would become ambiguous on *a priori* grounds. The second one is categorial: depending on the way we assent to gestures, they can, or so it seems, always be downgraded to a lower status. Finally, I shall take advantage of Anscombe’s philosophy of intention to show in which ways our environment can contribute to the ambiguity of gestures.

2 Complete, Incomplete, and Degenerate Gestures

The first concern is metaphysical. Is it possible to confuse genuine complete gestures with incomplete gestures, or even with events that do not even qualify as gestures at all and then make a kind of “category-mistake” (Ryle 1938) when we think of them? The claim in this section is that the kind of metaphysics we endorse plays an important role when we have to decide what counts as a gesture and to identify it as such. We shall see that there are two distinct situations: on the first hand, situations where we cannot even *identify* complete gestures, because our grammar, or if you prefer our ontology, is too narrow; on the other hand, there are situations where we deal with speciously complete gestures, gestures which *seem* complete but are not actually so.

To start answering, we need a characterization of gestures, and several candidates could come to mind. Georges Politzer, for example, in the French-speaking philosophy, made extensive use of “gestures” in his reconstruction of psychology and psychoanalysis. He thought of life as a “drama,” that is to say, as possessing a dramatic structure:

The act of the concrete individual, it is the life, but the life in the singular sense of the singular individual, in short, the life, in the dramatic sense of the word. (Politzer 1994, 34)

In a sense, our whole life *is* a gesture. But Politzer sometimes reduces gestures to mere acts, as when he argues that his psychology puts gestures at the center of the picture, only to add immediately:

A gesture that I make is a psychological fact, because it is a segment of the drama that my life represents. The way it inserts in this drama is given to the psychologist by the story that I can tell about this gesture [. . .] but it is the gesture illuminated by the narrative that is the psychological fact, and not the gesture apart, nor the realized content of the narrative. (Politzer 1994, 156, translation modified)

One could take up his analysis by saying that gestures are precisely this dynamic and dramatic totality: neither only “acts,” nor only “narratives.” While I think that adopting this redefinition would lead to rewrite a good part of the theory, which is the reason why I shall consider more promising candidates, it is worth noting that Politzer immediately presupposes a triadic structure: the act, the narrative, and the symbolic content of the narrative. Anything that would impair this triadic structure would also seriously alter gestures in this larger sense.

George Herbert Mead could be a candidate too, not only for what he says about the “conversation of gestures,” but for the relationship between gestures as

initiations of acts, and the more complete “social acts.” This would be promising in many ways but at the cost of exchanging the notion of gesture for the “social act.”

I shall rather build here on Giovanni Maddalena’s notion of gesture, defined as “any performed act with a beginning and an end that carries a meaning” (Maddalena 2015, 69), which is a clear and compact definition. This way, (1) we keep the idea of a dramatic sequence—there is a beginning and an end, (2) it is *performed*, and (3) it has a connection *with at least one meaning*. This first nominal definition is made more robust with the additional resources provided by Peirce’s philosophy, as read by Maddalena. This particularly holds for “complete gestures”: a complete gesture is, this time, any gesture that respects “all the characters [evidenced in] existential graphs: evidence, generalization, continuity in a Peircean sense, and an equal blending of kinds of signs” (Maddalena 2015, 70). Regarding this last clause, complete gestures will thus involve iconicity, indexicality, and symbolization, to respect this “equal blending.” If one of these dimensions is missing, the gesture is deemed “incomplete.”

Let us now face the two situations mentioned at the beginning of this section.

In the first one, we can be blinded by our categories, and some crucial elements for gestures to be complete will be missing *a priori*, for philosophical reasons, because of the ontology we have endorsed. We can understand why if we follow Peirce’s lead, as Maddalena does. Peirce, in his 1903 *Harvard Lectures* presenting his theory of the categories, gave a twofold approach, both semiotic and phenomenological, of his Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, which can also provide a nice framework to account for both complete and incomplete gestures. In the lecture “Seven Systems of Metaphysics,” Peirce shows that there are only seven systems of metaphysics, one complete system acknowledging the reality of the three categories—mainly Aristotle and Peirce—and six systems allowing only one or two categories. In the same way, here, complete gestures, as in rituals, ceremonies, works of art, or scientific experiments (at least in their most satisfactory forms), obviously display the three categories: they have their originality, their Firstness; their actuality, their Secondness; and of course, their more general content, their Thirdness. In contrast, and if we follow the analogy, incomplete gestures will miss one or two categories (or, in semiotic terms, the blending of kinds of signs will be imperfect). There can be a first ambiguity of gestures if we are not in a position to tell complete from incomplete gestures, and my claim is that this happens *a priori* if we have a philosophy that does not recognize the reality of each category in gestures.

Two remarks are in order here. First of all, in my reading of Peirce’s lectures, the six incomplete systems have different inner logics: I would argue that the “one category” systems are so many samples of metaphysical *extravagance*. Their

authors want to reconstruct the whole universe with only one resource, and Peirce certainly told us all that we needed about them. In the “Architecture of theories,” he gave the following metaphor:

Just as if a man, being seized with the conviction that paper was a good material to make things of, were to go to work to build a *papier mâché* house, with roof of roofing-paper, foundations of pasteboard, windows of paraffined paper, chimneys, bath tubs, locks, etc., all of different forms of paper, his experiment would probably afford valuable lessons to builders, while it would certainly make a detestable house, so those one-idea’d philosophies are exceedingly interesting and instructive, and yet are quite unsound. (Peirce 1960, 6.7, 1891)

The grammar here is too poor to allow for ambiguity.

Secondly, the two-categories systems are in general different, and more interesting philosophically: most of them will try to derive the “missing” category from the two others. For example, Berkeley, missing the category of Secondness, the “outward clash” (since there is no real worldly “outward” here), will try deriving it from mere ideas (passive ideas, Firstnesses) and the general laws of God’s action (Thirdness). One of the categories, in these systems, is only *apparent* but is not given a real ontological status. The best reply to these systems is not to show how extravagant they are but to show that the three categories are irreducible to each other. If we use this architectonic structure as a heuristic device to investigate gestures, we can expect to meet accounts where the creativity of the gesture is only apparent (that would be the case for a determinist account); and others where their dynamic component is obliterated (or considered as merely as the conjunctions of inner episodes and events in the world), and also accounts where the true generality and continuity of mental life, as well as the growth of meanings, are missing. This would hold, if we follow Peirce, for all the nominalist metaphysics.

The second situation is more interesting philosophically, as the same categorial scheme can be useful to investigate gestures which seem complete but are not actually so. The language of “degenerate” categories provides here such resources.

It should be noted that degeneracy is not a normative term; it is borrowed from mathematics and from the study of curves. In all cases where duality or triplicity reside only in the way of considering the thing, a category becomes “veiled” and is *degenerate*.

The First category, which is absolutely simple, has no degenerate form.

The Second category has one degenerate form and only one, which corresponds to the case where the duality, its “twoness,” resides only in the way of considering the fact while in reality there is nothing of the kind; this is the case, according to Peirce, of the relations of resemblance, which are the very type of

the relations of reason, and of the relations of identity, which are the very type of reflexive relations. In the first case, one can remove the dyadic relation without altering its members (resemblance), in the second one, one does not have a genuine dyadic relation (identity).

The Third category admits two main types of degeneracy:

- A dyadic degeneracy, which consists in an irrational plurality that is only a simple complication of duality; this is the case for the dichotomous method in philosophy: a subdivision is only a way of creating multiplicity from iterated dualities. It delivers us only semblances of Thirdness. In the different forms of this Thirdness, the three terms are not in real relation: a trivial example is that of the staple B that holds two sheets of paper A and C together. If the relation between A and B is removed, the relation between B and C remains (whereas the absence of only one of the three terms cancels the gift, which is the paradigm of genuine Thirdness).
- A monadic degeneracy, of which Peirce develops in these lectures only a version. It is not at first obvious to understand its nature and, for this reason, it is more prudent to grasp it from an example: “The most degenerate Thirdness is where we conceive a mere Quality of Feeling, or Firstness, to represent itself to itself as Representation. Such, for example, would be Pure Self-Consciousness, which might be roughly described as a mere feeling that has a dark instinct of being a germ of thought” (Peirce, 1960 [1903], 5.71). A representation of the Self to a Self as oneself would be a case of such a specious triadic relation.

Why do I think that degenerate forms would be useful here? For example, confirmation biases, so much discussed by cognitive scientists, are forms of degenerate seconds; my “gestures,” there, are not really interacting with the larger world, I am only projecting what was already hard-wired—in my brain—well before I had to act. In the same way, everything that is performed under the first three methods for settling beliefs described by Peirce are also degenerate gestures. There is a semblance of Secondness, but no real Secondness. The outcome is already settled, whatever the world actually is.

What about the dyadic generation of Thirdness? Any regularity emerging in the behavior of a collective, of a public, is not necessarily a “meaning,” or a real third. If this behavior is formatted by an algorithm, as on Facebook, the community of habits will only be the result of dyadic formatting. Or, if you prefer: it will be a raw effect of the technological interface with which we are dealing. This can certainly happen, too, when a crowd acts under the motivation of blind pulsions, of hatred, of bigotry. We shall have apparent meanings, apparent thirds, but the

real flavor of Thirdness will be missing. There lies the possibility of speciously complete gestures.

As for monadic degeneracy, it would cover every act through in which I am supposed to affect myself, such as in a mythological act of introspection. Perhaps the void subjectivity which is described by Dewey in *Individualism, Old and New*, would fit that narrative too.

A proper philosophical analysis would have two main tasks here: explaining why such acts, as they are described by their proponents, are not gestures; showing how components of complete gestures are in fact tacitly presupposed: in the case of introspection, if we choose to keep that word, we have firstnesses, but also a dialogical and thus a dyadic structure as well as a continuous development of meaning over time.

3 Infelicities

But that is not the whole story. Gestures are not complete before we “assent” to them, and this assent contributes to determining them, or, if we think in semiotic terms, to determine their meaning. From there on, we could say that there is never ever a really complete gesture if this means that it could not be interpreted again, and we could argue that there is a radical indeterminacy in all gestures, perhaps linked with their vagueness. I shall not repeat that story, since the conversation has already taken place between Giovanni Maddalena and Vincent Colapietro a few years ago (Maddalena 2016). Rather, I shall confine myself here to a simple argument: however powerful the synthesis they achieve, if gestures are not received and interpreted, they start soon to look like meteors falling from the sky, they are reduced to mere secondnesses, that is to say to their sheer actuality. They will be pure events, and we shall remain blind to their meaning. Assenting to them (or not) implies that their tentative “end” is not terminal, that they cannot be closed on themselves.

But that is still a general feature of gestures. Sometimes, we assent only to one part or one dimension of the gesture, and I shall take here an example from Maddalena:

One can participate in a gesture or make a gesture without assenting to it. In this case, the gesture will turn out to be an abuse, as Austin would have said, or it will even have the opposite outcome. In the novel *Vite dei santi* (Lives of the Saints) by Nino Ricci [. . .], the main character, Cristina, stigmatized in a small town in Molise in the early 1960s for having become pregnant while her husband had emigrated to America, entered the church aisle during Christmas mass and everyone took that action as a gesture of penitence and reconcil-

iation. Instead, Cristina performs that action without being aware of its implications. So it is not a gesture, and in the end that very action will be at the origin of the definitive break with the country. (Maddalena 2021, 51)

Of course, we can read things this way: Cristina is part of a gesture (the ceremony), perhaps, but she is not assenting to it (as a manifestation of penitence), and it is not really “her” gesture; she performs one act that is embedded into a larger gesture, and the way she performs it is crucial when we have to tell whether the whole interaction counts as a gesture or not. From my standpoint, we would have an interesting case of ambiguity, because we do not really know what is taking place by mere immediate observation or inspection. It is irreducibly vague until we know more about Cristina, and about the ceremony and the town as well.

To make that claim more precise, we can take advantage of Austin’s notion of “infelicity” (Austin 1962), as Maddalena himself does. One may remember that Austin identifies six main types of infelicities for a speech act. The first four are “misfires”: the act is not totally or really performed, or the conventions are not respected or the person performing the speech act has no authority to perform it. If I select two random people in the streets of Campobasso and loudly declared them “married,” nothing serious will ensue, even if I have said the exact same words as the mayor and quoted the relevant laws. In the gesture-language, I would not even have *performed* a gesture. Or at least, *that* gesture. After all, I might be a street artist performing live while being streamed on a video channel. I would then have performed another gesture. We need to have access to background conditions to tell (1) what kind of gesture we are considering and (2) whether, under that description, it is complete or not.

The last two infelicities are called “abuses” by Austin: the conventions, the setting, are there, the act is done and is done completely, but its consequences (its interpretants) are not endorsed by the agent. As, for example, when someone makes a promise, with all the decorum that this implies, the witnesses, and so on, but has absolutely *no intention of keeping his promise*, or pretexts that he “has changed” is mind and is thus not committed to it anymore.

We might thus have instances of events that *look like* gestures, but where the speaker does not assent to all the consequences and implications of the act. For the one making that kind of promise, things are not ambiguous, but for everyone else, if this kind of thing happens too often, gestures will *become* ambiguous, because we shall then not be in a situation where we can tell a complete gesture from an abuse. Some repeated abuses impair the possibility of complete gestures by others.

Here, the ambiguity and the confusion lie with the difficult distinction between a gesture and the mere appearance of a gesture, and it can be argued that there is a massive “contribution of the environment.” The main problem with the idea that we would be living in a post-truth era, as most have seen, is not an epistemic problem only, it concerns acts, and speech acts for that matter: are the agents or the sources of information really endorsing all the consequences of their speech acts? Are they really doing what we think they do when they say what they say? The confusion that ensues is not only a proliferation of the false; it is a weakening of complete gestures, as the fabric on which our world is built.

But do we have cases where the same sequence of action can belong to different gestures, which would make the case for an objective ambiguity of some gestures at least? The confusion this time would not lie between apparent and genuine gestures but between two gestures.

4 Pumping

Let me try to make that clearer, since that might sound too cryptic. Anscombe, who was certainly not a pragmatist, can help us in clarifying this difficulty and making it more concrete.¹

Her magisterial work, *Intention*, contains incisive statements about our access to intentions as a “knowledge without observation.” It is also relevant to mention her here, since identifying intentions is instrumental when we assent to gestures. The book also contains some rather radical statements about intentional “nesting,” which are less commented upon but are nevertheless crucial in order to understand why gestures can be ambiguous. In §23, she introduces the famous “man at the pump.” This man is making a gesture, and even if we do not have manual pumps anymore, we can still recognize this gesture.

A man is pumping water into the cistern which supplies the drinking water of a house. Someone has found a way of systematically contaminating the source with a deadly cumulative poison whose effects are unnoticeable until they can no longer be cured. The house is regularly inhabited by a small group of party chiefs, with their immediate families, who are in control of a great state; they are engaged in exterminating the Jews and perhaps plan a world war. The man who contaminated the source has calculated that if these people are destroyed some good men will get into power who will govern well, or even institute the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and secure a good life for all the people; and he has revealed

¹ Since the present chapter was submitted, I have developed other consequences of Anscombe’s account, on the basis of the “pump” example, in Girel (2023).

the calculation, together with the fact about the poison, to the man who is pumping. (Anscombe 2000, §23)

First, there is a muscular action, which consists of raising and lowering the arm, in short, pumping. By pumping, he replenishes the cistern of a cottage; pumping is dictated by his task, which is to feed the cottage with water. But the water is poisoned. Knowing that the inhabitants are going to drink it, the man who pumps is preparing, even carrying out, an assassination; supplying water becomes a means to this end. However, the inhabitants of the house are officers of an occupying army; the man with the pump is enrolled in the Résistance.

Here, the man at the pump is aware of the project; there is no “abuse,” as in the former example.

Anscombe’s idea was that one and the same act, moving one’s arm up and down, well, pumping, could serve several intentions, and that the “highest” intention so to speak “swallowed” all the lower intentions, under ordinary conditions. The man is not making four gestures at the same time, if we follow Anscombe:

[. . .] when we speak of four intentions, we are speaking of the character of being intentional that belongs to the act in each of the four descriptions; but when we speak of one intention, we are speaking of intention *with which*; the last term we give in such a series gives the intention *with* which the act in each of its other descriptions was done, and this intention so to speak swallows up all the preceding intentions *with* which earlier members of the series were done (Anscombe 2000, §26).

Anscombe rightly points out that these actions are not related to each other as causes and effects; *it is one and the same act that can be described in these various ways*. Our ability to identify the action depends on the fact that under ordinary conditions, and even under the extraordinary conditions of war, we know roughly where to stop in an intentional chain. We “grasp” the gesture, to use a phrase that surfaced in the book symposium quoted above.

In Anscombe’s example, the “intention with which” we act is given by the last term, and this might be a sensible reply to our puzzle about the identification of gestures. We could devise the maxim: *when you are in doubt, look for the most encompassing gesture, and interpret the rest as “sub-gestures.”* Things are not so simple though: a conspiracist will generally want to go further up the chain of intentions. For any “ordinary” gesture, he will always look for a larger intention, a larger gesture, or a mischievous goal. So, we cannot say that “the” gesture always corresponds to the most comprehensive account, or to the most inclusive description. Some persons are definitely “too” inclusive. Conspiracy theories, in general, are a powerful solvent for gestures.

I draw two conclusions from this example. The first one is, again, that background conditions are necessary to allow us to identify the relevant level when

we face a gesture. These conditions are provided by our ordinary interactions with others, and by our practices as well as by our institutions. They might obtain, or not, depending on the kind of community we make, with other inquirers. To phrase it differently: thinking that officials are “hiding the truth” or “stealing the election” does not have the same status in a country where the balance of powers is respected, where institutions work in full transparency, where the press is free, and in a country where institutions are corrupted. In the second situation, this does not imply that there are actually more conspiracies, but that disambiguating them from normal processes becomes more difficult. The second conclusion is that, even when we do not live in a conspiratorial society, we often face a radical ambiguity, since we never fully know in advance what will be the good level of description and, thus, what is the right assent we have to give to the gesture.

One can also add that Anscombe, even if she does not develop this point, opens another question, that of intentional *bifurcation*: one and the same act, at first sight, can serve two different and competing intentions. After all, we do not know the man with the pump very well: perhaps he is despised by the people in his village and—even if we agree that by pumping he is murdering the inhabitants of the cottage—his intention might be to bring retaliation on his village. This time, it is not a matter of moving up, it is a matter of deciding. If we do not know more, we cannot decide: even if we had all the physical details of his pumping-gesture at hand, we would still have to cope with ambiguity. If this example seems too exotic, think of a researcher with a conflict of interest. He or she is working, say, on the effect of the sun on global warming—a serious question, but also a favorite topic for climate skeptics—while being funded by a fossil fuel producer. How will we identify his action? There is indeed a bifurcation: the pump man is resisting *or* harming his neighbors; the researcher is extending science *or* is, whether he is aware of it or not, a denier; the manipulated person does what he would have done anyway *or* serves the interests of another, acting then in a different way than he would have done without it. Here, we often cannot answer without the help of a full repertoire of other gestures: what has the man at the pump been doing or experiencing in the past? What kind of science is this researcher doing usually? What is the track-record of the institution which sponsors him?

My aim here is not to propose a new analysis of the grammar of intention, nor an exegesis of Anscombe. However, I suggest that Anscombe’s two problems, that of “swallowing up” and that of bifurcation, arise in relation to gestures, if we understand them as distributed over a series of discrete acts, whose synthetic identity they provide. Gestures can be (and can become) ambiguous, not only subjectively ambiguous, in the sense that I would have difficulty interpreting it or even in the sense that its agent would not have clear ideas about it, but objectively ambiguous when considered in isolation.

5 How Things Came Undone

I have first argued that the grammar for gestures might be enriched through the addition of degenerate categories, which seem necessary when we want to say that apparently complete gestures are not so complete after all. I have also claimed that some narrow metaphysics do not even allow us to make a distinction between complete and incomplete gestures, so much so that the ontological status of gestures becomes ambiguous.

I am aware that more should be said to give flesh to some of the arguments about ambiguity I have offered above, but I hope the general direction is clear. As we have seen, a gesture is not “complete” if it does not meet what Maddalena called an “assent.” This is linked to the communicative nature of the gesture: a gesture that would never be “taken up” by others would not be a complete gesture. But precisely, what takes up and interprets a gesture . . . is another gesture, that might be performed, or not. Rutherford’s experimentation, Michelson-Morley’s experimentation, in the register of experimental science, a novel like Proust’s *La Prisonnière*, a complete mathematical proof . . . are complete gestures only if they can be taken up again, and this taking up again by other gestures, new experiments, writing articles, reading and writing novels, mathematical works, is essential to their “fruitfulness.” There is a way of presenting this gesture, the result of which is never certain, but there are also ways of receiving it, which determine just as much the success, the “felicity,” of this gesture. In short, there are no isolated gestures; there are *circles of gestures*.

This explains why the background conditions, that I mentioned when I was discussing Anscombe, are so important. When our forms of life become chaotic, when the community of interpretation becomes unstable, or again when publics remain spectral and “eclipsed,” to use Dewey’s term, a background condition for gestures is receding in the twilight.

Hence a last and longer point about the dynamics between complete and incomplete gestures: in the ordinary sense, a gesture is someone’s gesture, and the meaning that this gesture will have depends on the one who makes it. It is a platitude, certainly. The gesture of giving a coin to a hungry person does not have the same meaning and therefore is not the same gesture if the one who makes it is a millionaire or a beggar. It is a manifestation of charity in the first case, a sacrifice in the second. The qualification of the gesture will remain the same if the millionaire is disguised as a beggar and if the beggar has just been given beautiful clothes. We cannot totally bracket the agent when we assess a gesture. There would be here a risk of relativism here, if one could no longer say anything about a gesture if one did not relate it to an individual perspective. This risk is “limited,” though, because we usually manage to agree on gestures. It is also limited because

in the perspective that is undoubtedly shared by most authors in this volume. A gesture is social from the outset: in the same way as there is no private language, a language where I alone could renegotiate all the meanings all the time, there is no private gesture.

6 Conclusion

Representing things this way makes it possible to cast light on a deeper problem: any gesture very quickly becomes independent of the person who made it; very quickly, it leads another life, which thus continues beyond the author. If that is true, is the gesture then the particular, which one can associate with a proper name, which one can arrange under a date and a place, or is it, rather, this common and larger life? Certainly, complete gestures can be instantiated in the two forms. In science, we have for example major experiments, which are complete gestures, on their own account, and can be taken up by others, but we also have the unending life of inquiry, and it is tempting to interpret it as a complete gesture performed by all the inquirers, dead or alive. This twofold life of gestures opens the possibility that what is a gesture at one level becomes an act in the service of a gesture at another level. Any gesture can become an act again, and this is still part of its meaning as a gesture, of its possible interpretations. In other words, its perfection is never taken for granted; the completeness of a gesture, paradoxically, is contingent upon the completeness of other and of future gestures.

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